The Naturalistic Implications in John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men

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Abstract

The paper sheds light on the naturalistic aspects in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937). It depicts the novelist's presentation of the hard conditions of the poor farmers and workers at the time. It also gives a short introduction about the nature of naturalism in the USA and its major characteristics. A brief plot overview is mentioned and the major characters are discussed. A special focus is made on the characters as they cope with the overwhelming and controlling forces represented by the environment and circumstances that determine their status in life.

In conclusion, the paper shows how such forces degrade the human beings into animals with animalistic qualities due to their useless search for unattainable dreams.

المستخلص

يسلط البحث الحالي الضوء على جوانب الفلسفة الطبيعية في رواية جون ستاينبك القصيرة " عن الفئران والرجال " (1937). وتتناول ما صوره الروائي من الظروف الصعبة التي عاشها المزارعون والعمال الفقراء في تلك الفترة. وتقدم ايضا مقدمة موجزة عن طبيعة الفلسفة الطبيعية في امريكا وسماتها الرئيسية. ويشير البحث بايجازالى الاحداث الرئيسية في الرواية ويناقش الشخصيات الرئيسية فيها.
ويتم التركيز على الشخصيات الرئيسية وصورة تحملهم للقوى المسيطرة والمتمثلة بالبيئة والظروف التي تحدد مصيرهم في الحياة.
ختاما يقدم البحث استنتاجا على ان هذه الرواية القصيرة هي مأساة اتسمت صفة الفلسفة الطبيعية لان الشخصيات فيها اكتسبت صفات أقرب الى الحيوانية منها الى الانسانية نتيجة لبحثها اليائس عن احلام بعيدة المنال.

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John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* (1937) has been discussed by many literary critics and reviewers since its publication. They often tended to tackle aspects concerning Steinbeck's use of realism, alienation and tragedy as he pictured the conditions of workers and farmers he saw and interacted with in California. But the remarkable thing in his novella is its naturalistic tendencies. In fact, when critics refer to this element in this novella they tend to associate it with literary realism. It is worthwhile here to start with a brief introduction to naturalism in America, refer to some of its distinguishing characteristics and try to shed more light on its naturalistic vision.

American literary naturalism is a literary movement that became popular in the USA in the late nineteenth century and is often associated with literary realism. The term naturalism was first introduced by Emile Zola (1840-1902), the well known French author who is also credited as a prominent figure in the development of French literary naturalism. In the second part of the nineteenth century, this literary movement became popular all over Europe, from England to Russia. American writers were particularly influenced by the British and French models and began to adapt the form to reflect American social, economic, and cultural conditions. [1]

While it is strongly associated with realism, in its emphasis on depicting surface reality, critics believe that the American form is heavily influenced by the concept of determinism. Determinism is the theory that the influence of heredity and environment determine human behavior. The difference between realism and naturalism, moreover, lies in the fact that naturalism is connected to the doctrine of biological, economic, and social determinism. Donna M. Campbell argues that " Unlike realism, which focuses on literary technique, naturalism implies a philosophical position: for naturalistic writers, since human beings are, in Emile Zola's phrase, "human beasts," characters can be studied through their relationships to their surroundings" [2].

In their fiction, naturalist writers try to depict life accurately through an exploration of the causal factors that shape a character's life as well as a deterministic approach to the character's thoughts and actions. Therefore, instead of free will, a naturalist depicts a character's actions as determined by environmental forces.[3]

Naturalist fiction is characterized by writings that explore the conflicts between social classes, particularly the exploitation of workers by those in positions of power. Also naturalist writers create stories that tend to focus on one specific occupation or trade in order to document society. As such, the setting is usually presented as far from being an ideal place. The characters created in the story are, therefore, devoid of free will, inserted into specific plots and observed as they cope with what fate presents.[4] Also important in naturalism is that the naturalists often look at the other side of life, such as confusion, alcoholism, and drug use, because of the negative influence these phenomenon have on people. These characteristics will be related to *Of Mice and Men* later in the paper.

John Steinbeck’s novella reflects life during the Great Depression in the real agricultural town of Salinas, California. Steinbeck was familiar with this area as it was his birthplace and where his family owned land when he was a small child. Steinbeck patterned his characters after the men and women who were affected by the Great Depression as it contributed to the poverty of all walks of life across America. Men and women across the United States were forced to sell their assets and travel in order to find work. [5]

Of Mice and Men is about two laborers, George Milton and Lennie Small. George is a small, slender and smart man; Lennie is a large, clumsy mentally defective man who is physically strong. George had promised Lennie’s Aunt Clara that he would take care of Lennie when she died. They have traveled from Weed, California, to work together on a ranch in Soledad. Lennie and George have fled from Weed because Lennie was accused of trying to assault a girl. He was touching her dress and when he stroked it too hard she screamed and he hung on to her in fear. This is a serious problem to both of

them. Lennie is unable to control his instinctive actions. Like a child, he crushes everything that feels soft and furry in his hand. He apologetically confirms to George about the rabbits that, "they was so little," he said,… "I'd pet 'em, and pretty soon they bit my fingers and I pinched their heads a little and then they was dead-because they was so little." (*Of Mice and Men*, p. 10) [6] George and Lennie have a dream, to earn enough money so that they can have a place to call their own and rabbits.

They arrive in Soledad and meet the Boss, and his son Curley. George and Lennie also meet Slim, the ranch hand who seems to have authority in the bunkhouse, Curley's wife, and Candy, the old swamper. Candy has a dog, it is very old and dirty, and smells up the bunkhouse; so when Slim's dog has puppies, they convince Candy to let them kill the old dog and give him one of the new puppies. The night they kill Candy's dog, George tells him about the dream that he and Lennie have, and Candy expresses his wish to share the dream with them. The next Sunday, while in the barn, Lennie accidentally kills his puppy that Slim has given to him when he pets it too hard.

Curley's wife shows up in the barn and tells him to stroke her hair if he likes soft things. When she screams for him to stop, he grabs her neck in fear and breaks it. Candy finds her in the barn and tells George. When the men come back from playing horseshoes and find Curley's wife in the barn, they grab their shotguns, but Curley's is missing. They assume that Lennie took it, and they go out to search for him. George finds Lennie near the river bank, right where he told him to go if any trouble happened. He talks to him about their dream and at the same time puts a gun to his head and fires it. When the rest of the men find him they assume that George found Lennie with the gun and took it away from him and shot him.

Their dream is proved to be unattainable, and Steinbeck provides ample foreshadowing in the novella, most notably in Candy's dog. "Steinbeck", Cynthia Burkhead explains, "intends to show that the dream has finally become reality for Lennie, but that it is only possible in death because in life things will always happen, out of human control, to destroy those dreams".[7] Hence, Lennie and Candy's dog are symbols of alienation in general and each character can stand alone as simply a representative of their larger group.[8]

His [Lennie's] foolishness often allows him to speak honestly where others would not. Lennie is also symbolic of people who are mistreated and discriminated against because of their mental handicaps.[9]
In fact, Lennie stands for those people who take things simply because he represents the innocent side of life which some people do not like or reject.

Cynthia Burkhead also argues that much of Steinbeck's work emphasizes the philosophy he shared with his closest friend Edward Ricketts, who was a marine scientist from whom Steinbeck learned much about objective, scientific observation and natural processes. The philosophy resulting from this collaboration was called the non-teleological thought developed in much of Steinbeck's works.
This non-teleological philosophy:
Stresses what "is", the actual facts of human existence, as opposed to what might be or could be hoped for in a caring universe. The moment is what is important, what can be known, not some potential end or goal. In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck presents this philosophy through the eventual negation of George and Lennie's dream, which is taken away by the events occurring in their life, the things that happen to them to show the dream, or end, to be merely a fantasy. *Of Mice and Men*'s major theme of naturalism, as well as the objective, nonjudgmental narration of the novel, is consistent with the philosophy of the author and the scientist. [10]
According to this philosophy people are looked at in their environment and are not expected to be cared after by the harsh reality. That is why the protagonists' dream is shattered and turned into a fantasy.

Steinbeck's characters are poor, uneducated, and unsophisticated. The subject matter deals with the hard and unpleasant experiences of life which reduce such characters to less than human beings, and their struggle to survive clashes with a harsh environment. The environment is of every day life. Acts of violence and passion lead to desperate moments and violent death. In short, life on its lowest levels is not as simple as it seems to be. There is a discussion of fate that affects a character; generally the controlling force is society and the surrounding environment. Characters are conditioned and [11]

controlled by environment, heredity, chance, or instinct; but they have compensating humanistic values [2]which affirm their individuality and life. Both forces are clearly functioning in *Of Mice and Men*.[1]

Furthermore, the concept that Steinbeck clearly borrows from biology is that of environmental fitness. His characters can be described as either fit or unfit for their social roles on the basis of their physical and intellectual abilities. Candy, for instance, is an aged and hunchbacked man who is thus relegated to a low place in the social hierarchy because he is a swamper. He complains, "I ain't much good with on'y one hand. I lost my hand right here on this ranch. That's why they give me a job swampin'." (p.55) In contrast, Slim, the most respected and impressive worker on the ranch is described as being, "the prince of the ranch, capable of driving ten, sixteen, even twenty mules with a single line to the leaders… his hatchet face was ageless. He might have been thirty five or fifty". (pp.31-32) Similar to Candy, Crooks, named for his crooked back, works menial tasks.

The same concept applies also to other characters in the novella, animal and human alike. Candy's old dog, for instance, is judged offensive by the more fit members of the bunk house society, Slim and Carlson, and so the dog is killed. Candy can do nothing to stop this; he is weak, and in this world the strong survive. The dog's fatal end indicates that the cruel fate awaits the feeble. Its only crime is smelling bad, and though there are other solutions to this problem, Carlson insists upon killing him.

Comparatively, Lennie is not fit to live in a society as it exists in *Of Mice and Men*. His intellectual weakness parallels Candy's physical weakness. He lacks a basic sense of right and wrong, fails to control his dangerous physical power, and cannot look after himself. In the end, he is effectively terminated by George. We see that even his friend and companion has accepted that Lennie, like Candy's dog, is better killed.

So, George and Lennie represent a working class to which they belong by the facts of their birth, their potential, and the circumstances of their environment. Their attempts to change their circumstances are shown to be impossible. This, at times, gave Steinbeck the reputation of being pessimistic, for his stories were far from fantasy. They often explore the world as a place where men have to fight to survive in a universe that has no morality and does not care about them. [13]

This is what John F. Slater terms as "the victimization of characters by uncontrollable, even unrecognizable imperatives latent in nature and in manmade systems like the rudimentary verbal ones the characters themselves put together"[14] This means that there is an uncontrollable force that victimizes the helpless characters and leads to a tragic end.

There is a point which may be significant to shed light on in this respect. Because tragedies traditionally center on main characters who are prominent types, whose falls from grace and great heights are sudden, *Of Mice and Men* does not fit this description, which makes this book one of the rare and deep novels. As such, in endearing us to George, Steinbeck shows that all men matter and that no one's story is more or less important than anyone else's. Common men can also be the heroes of their [15].own lives or the victims of great tragedy

Similarly, George tries to control Lennie's activities and movements on the ranch to prevent troubles because he is in need of work. He can not prevent Lennie's tragic meeting with Curley's wife in the barn. As soon as she shows up, Lennie twice repeats that she is beautiful which warns George about her being jail bait and rat trap, and his insistence that he and Lennie must stay at the ranch until they make their stake. So, Steinbeck's use of naturalism in his works is to bring awareness about such problems in society that he dealt with in his own life.

In the light of the naturalistic view the characters in *Of Mice and Men*, it can be argued, are reduced to animals, which look for their living and struggle for their existence. Lennie who, through Steinbeck's description, has a large and strong body and dumb nature, resembles a bear. George, with his small body and quiet scheming nature, he is more a rodent than a man.

The first man was small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features. Every part of him was defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a thin and ebony nose. Behind him walked his opposite, a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws. (pp.3-4)

As such, frequently the two men, particularly Lennie, are described in animal similes. Of course, Lennie's vision of nature is not that realistic. He thinks of a fanciful nature full of furry rabbits and mice. He has no notion of the darkness in the natural world, the competition and the cruelty. Lennie asks George time and time again to repeat the same story:

Lennie spoke craftily, "Tell me – like you done before."
"Tell you what?"
"About the rabbits."…
"Come on, George. Tell me. Please, George. Like you done before."
"You get a kick outta that, don't you? Awright, I'll tell you, and then we'll eat our supper…." (pp.13-14)

He is even helpless and unable to figure out how to feed himself without George. Unlike Lennie, George sees the world through suspicious and critical eyes. He sees only the darkness where Lennie sees only the light. George may complain, but this complaint seems to be hollow. In fact, George needs Lennie's innocence as much as Lennie needs George's experience. This dichotomy of social determinism versus biological determinism and dichotomy of innocence versus experience are apparent in more than one case in the novella.

There is another significant point concerning violence as another aspect of naturalism in this novella. George warns Lennie about Curley, whom he correctly perceives as a threat to their plans, and repeats his instructions to him about returning to the pool in the river should trouble occur. Yet, he can not hinder the doomed clash between Lennie and Curley. When the enraged Curley, after being angered by Slim, enters the bunkhouse spoiling for a fight and misinterprets Lennie's smile at the memory of the dream ranch:

He slashed at Lennie with his left, and then smashed down his nose with a right. Lennie gave a cry of terror, blood welled from his nose. "George", he cried. "Make 'um let me alone, George." … Lennie's hands remained at his sides; he was too frightened to defend himself. (p.58)

The poor workers are always represented as being afraid of any harsh contact with the people in power. What George tries to make it clear to Lennie is that any clash with Curley will only lead to another loss, especially when Curley awaits such a chance. But the inevitable clash occurs and Lennie, despite his huge body and toughness, only tries to avoid Curly's fists and defends himself with his hands. The act of violence here implies that the helpless poor who are deprived of free will by factors like heredity and environment are only expected to be crushed when they collide with the hostile world.

In the same manner, Candy becomes helpless to prevent the fatal end of his old dog by Carlson's hands, foreshadowing Lennie's death by George's hands. Carlson complains:

"Well, I can't stand him in here," said Carlson. "That stink hangs around even after he's gone." He walked over with his heavy-legged stride and looked down at the dog. "Got no teeth," he said. "He's all stiff with rheumatism. He ain't no good to you, Candy. An' he ain't no good to himself. Why'n't you shoot him, Candy?" (p.41)

With careful details, Carlson describes how he would shoot the dog so that it would not feel any pain and he points with his toe to the back of the dog's head. George too will decide that he must shoot Lennie, like a mad rather than decrepit dog, for the unplanned murder of another man's wife. In a way, Steinbeck represents Lennie and the old dog as being crippled. Although Lennie is mentally handicapped by birth, he has a strong and big body, while the old dog is physically handicapped because of old age. Each makes a burden to those accompanying them and to society. Just as Lennie is strong worker, Candy's dog was once the best sheep dog in Candy's eyes.

The bond that ties Candy to his dog and George to Lennie can not be comprehended by others in the bunkhouse. Only this bond that keeps a clever man like George bound to the crippled Lennie and makes Candy keep the useless dog all this time. So, the workers are unable to understand Candy's sentimental companionship with what they see as stinking dog. Lennie, furthermore, is absolutely attached to his puppy. He obeys George's commands unthinkingly, as a dog obeys an owner. "But you ain't get in no trouble," George threatens Lennie," because if you do, I won't let you tend the rabbits." …"I won't get in no trouble, George. I ain't gonna say a word." (p.16)

In his pocket Lennie carries an actual mouse but dead from too much handling. Later he kills the puppy with playful petting. He is like a child who is fond of delicate creatures. He is what Mark Spilka expresses as "Steinbeck’s example of senseless killing in nature".[16] Lennie is meant to be childlike, without power to judge or master social fate. While his friend George Milton is given the privilege of being in charge, above his friend and able to judge the right and the wrong. The opening scene indicates how much petty satisfaction he takes in giving Lennie orders and complaining about the burden of thinking for him.

Although women are slightly mentioned in *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck's attitudes about them are remarkable. He already showed the woman in the attracting red dress in Weed who provoked Lennie into trying to feel it. His action was misunderstood and caused them to run away. But women have another significant role. Lennie is as dangerous to them as they are to him. Steinbeck also reduces them to animals, like the pet mice and rabbits that Lennie loves passionately. Like the mice and rabbits, they are soft and easily crushed. Their role in the work as causing troubles seems quite clear.[17]

Lennie first pets Curley’s wife, then breaks her neck. His innocent desire is simple: to stroke something furry, and to stop the furry thing from yelling so George won’t be mad at him. But George has predicted this episode when he called Curley’s wife a rattrap, a bitch, a piece of jailbait.

George faces the same dilemma. The aroused ranch hands, led by Curley, run out to find Lennie and shoot him. George, who had stolen Carlson's gun, gets to Lennie first. The same feeling, that caused Carlson decide to put an end to Candy's dog, motivates George as he leads the social cripple Lennie to his dream world:

George raised the gun and steadied it, and he brought the muzzle of it close to the back of Lennie's head. The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger. The crash of the shot rolled up the hills and rolled down again. Lennie jarred, and then settled slowly forward to the sand, and he lay without quivering. (p. 95)

The situation here is different and difficult. George is not going to shoot an animal. Although his hand shook, he at last manages to steady it because it seems he has enough of Lennie's follies. George shoots and Lennie falls down. The way in which Lennie jarred gives the sense of an animal that gets shot and jars in the same way

The characters' dream worlds provide and contribute to one of the central themes in *Of Mice and Me*n. It is a story about dreaming of the future, and it is about the failure of American dream. [18] George and Lennie have a dream: they only want to make enough money to buy their own land. Their dream proves to be impossible to attain because of circumstances that seem out of their control. When they reveal this dream to others, it seems to be infectious. Candy reveals his will to stake all the money he has in the world to attain it, he said miserably: "Maybe if I give you guys my money, you'll let me hoe in the garden even I ain't no good at it. An' I'll be on our own place, an' I'll be let to work on our own place".(p.56) Curley who is determined, mean, and little boxer has an ambitious dream of being a prominent boxer. After he fights and starts hitting Lennie his hand ends up crushed. Thus, Lennie crushes his dream of becoming a boxer.

Crooks is a black, crippled old fellow. He lives in the stables by the farm animals. He is nothing better than a farm animal, and he just wants to be equal. "Cause I'm black", he once bitterly told Lennie, "They play cards in there, but I can't play because I'm black. They say I stink. Well, I tell you, you all of you stink to me". (p. 62) As a black man, Crooks is clearly liable to insults by Curley's wife who calls

him "nigger", for it is his social identity as a nigger that his dream of being equal goes awry when she threatens him:

"Listen, Nigger", she said. "You know what I can do to you if you open your trap?"
Crooks stared hopelessly at her, and then he sat down on his bunk and drew into himself.
She closed on him. "You know what I could do?"
Crooks seemed to grow smaller, and he pressed himself against the wall. "Yes, ma'am."
"Well, you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny." (p. 73)

His dream immediately comes to an end by his exploiters. Curley's wife, who is not even given a first name, marries a man for whom she feels no sense of affection because she is trapped in the caged environment of the farm life. Her assertion that she could have been in a show or become an actress in Hollywood is just self- deception.[19] She tells Lennie that she is tired of being with Curley and wants to get out of the bunkhouse. She then starts showing off her shiny, soft hair to Lennie as they are talking. Eventually her neck gets snapped by Lennie, thus her dream of being in the movies, obviously, is not going to come true.

What really counts in this enclosed setting is that none of the figures in this story appears to be capable of growing beyond what they already are. Accordingly, each is trapped into an identity that is determined by their social status in life, as in the cases of Candy, of Crooks and of Candy's ancient dog. Their injuries and defects only make them descend down the ladder of life toward a new condition when they are disposed of once they outlive their usefulness. All of these characters play a role in the theme of the book and most of them, if not all of them are misfits. Every one of the characters has a dream but every single one of them goes awry.

*Of Mice and Me*n, as such, is a naturalistic tragedy that pictures humans as animals, with animal thoughts and instincts, and blends with naturalism elements of realism and alienation. The characters, especially Lennie, are frequently compared to animals. Many of them also have primitive, unfeeling attitudes. The animalistic qualities of Steinbeck's characters show the naturalistic attitude of the book.

Notes

1. Educational Broadcasting Corporation, *The American Novel*: 1890s – 1920s Naturalism, www.pbs.org/wnet/americannovel/timeline/index.html 5/7/2010.
2. Donna M. Campbell, *Naturalism in American Literature*, http://www.wsu.edu/campbelld/amlit/natural.htm 09/14/2010.
3. Educational Broadcasting Corporation, *The American Novel*.
4. *Of Mice and Men* Criticism, http://www.enotes.com/criticism, 22/7/2010.
5. Paul P. Reuben, *Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide* ,http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/home.htm, 25/8/2010.
6.http://www.diesel-ebooks.com/item/ebook/Mice-and-Men-eBook/.html, John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, (2004), all subsequent quotations are from this text.
7. Cynthia Burkhead, *Student Companion to John Steinbeck*, (London: Greenwood Press, 2002), p.54.
8. Ibid.
. Ibid.9
10. Ibid, p.58.
11. Ibid, pp. 58-59.
12. Reuben.
13. Reuben.

14. John F. Slater, *Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men* (Novel) (1937), in Michael J. Meyer, ed. *The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men*, (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2009), p.89.
15. Ibid.
16. Mark Spilka, *Of George and Lennie and Curley's Wife: Sweet Violence in Steinbeck's Eden*, in Michael J. Meyer ed., The Essential Criticism of *John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men*, (Toronto: The Scarecrow Press, 2009), p.64.
17.Samuel I. Bellman, *Critical Views on Of Mice and Men*, in Harold Bloom, ed. *Comprehensive Research and Study Guide*, (Chelsea: House Publishers, 2000), p.58.
18. See, Harold Bloom, ed. *The American Dream*, (Bloom's Literary Criticism: InfoBase Publishing, 2009), pp.133-140.
19. Of Mice and Men, The Gale Group Inc., 2002, http://www.enotes.com/ of-mice-and-men/studyguide.htm. 13/9/2010.

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